

LEARNERS' MOTIVATION FOR LITERACY IN THE MOTHER TONGUE IN IBADAN METROPOLIS.

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Abstract

The study examines the desirability of and motivational needs for basic literacy in the mother tongue and library use in Ibadan metropolis. Data were collected through indepth interviews with 25 adult basic learners. The study reveals a strong desire for literacy in the mother tongue by the respondents. The learners' strongest motivations for learning in the mother tongue and the use of library are linked to the opportunity literacy brings, self actualization and the desire to become literate in a familiar language so as to keep their languages alive. Thus, in terms of literacy promotion and/or development, literacy in the mother tongue would enhance learners' greater participation, improved interest and the development of a sustainable literacy culture among the populace.

Keywords: Motivation, basic literacy, Mother Tongue, Library use.

Background to the Study

Language attitudes are central to the success or failure of literacy programmes. This is because language is an instrument of thought necessary in any programme that takes the cognitive abilities of man into consideration. As observed by Benson (2005), many developing countries are characterized by individual as well as societal multi-lingualism, yet, continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak is called 'submersion' because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly, when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher/instructors.

Internationally, there is growing support for use of the mother tongue to teach literacy. For learning to read and write, it is best to know the language one is taught in. Many people believe that to teach basic literacy in a language other than the mother tongue is a recipe for "pedagogic disaster" (Lauglo, 2001 as quoted in Benson 2005). It also undermines and leads to extinction of learners' culture. Adegbija (2003) suggests that the most effective way to build learners' literacy skills is to begin by teaching them to read and write in their home language, and how to use the library resources at their disposal.

Nigeria is home to a large number of indigenous ethnic groups. Some of these indigenous groups are quite large (e.g. the Yorubas, the Hausas, the Igbos), and others

(e.g. the Nupes, the Ijaws, the Tivs, the Efiks), that are of lesser population. The purposes of speakers of a language in desiring vernacular (mother tongue) literacy according to McKay (1982), may range from the desire to enhance tribal prestige, to the desire for various types of practical, religious or pleasure literature in their own language, or for vernacular communication via letters, newspaper reading, and so on. The focus of this study, therefore, was highlight learners' perceived desirability of and the motivational reasons for literacy in the mother tongue by adult basic learners. The study as a matter of fact, sought to provide answer to this research question - what are adult learners motivational reasons for literacy in the mother tongue?

Method and Materials

Participants:

Nine male and sixteen female basic literacy learners enrolled in one of the four centers of the Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan Extra -mural Programme participated in the study. Learners' participation in the study was voluntary (83.3% of eligible individuals participated) and the mean age of participants was approximately 29.5 years old (ranging from 25 to ≥ 59). Approximately 68% of the sample was Yoruba, with the remainder, about an even distribution of Igbos, Edos and those from the middle belt area.

Procedure:

Data for the study were collected through oral interview conducted in a mixture of Yoruba language and pidgin English for learners who do not understand the language of the immediate environment using an interview guide. The interviews conducted enabled the investigator to interact personally with these learners and also, to observe and take note of expressions that are non-verbal but all the same, provides supporting or relevant information in respect of the phenomenon being investigated.

Results and Discussion

Table1: Learners' Preferred Language of Literacy

Preferred language	Literacy	Freq.	%
Mother Tongue		21	84.0
English Language		04	16.0
Total		25	100.0

Considering the learners preferred language of literacy, 84% of the respondents, preferred literacy in the mother tongue to literacy in English. Only 16.0% favoured literacy in English over, literacy in the mother tongue. From the above, the verdict is obvious – adult learners (going by the majority rule), preferred language of literacy is the mother tongue.

The result of this study is consistent with Adegbija's (2003), submission that learners who were instructed in the mother tongue score higher in numeracy and literacy skills than those taught in English language. It was further observed that learners taught

in their mother tongue responded more quickly to the learning situation than those taught in the target language (English). In addition, the present result seem to have found relevance in Prah's (2003) observation that cultural freedom can not be cultivated, expanded or developed where the languages in which people are 'most creative and innovative' are not languages of instruction.

One of the reasons advanced for this position is that the mother tongue, being the language of intimacy and basic group communication, it allies facility with effectiveness. In addition, mother tongues as observed by Adegbija (2003), have many natural resources including artifacts, a rich predominantly oral society, etc, that can easily be tapped to ensure maximum understanding in the learning environment.

The above is in line with Hagnonnou's (2007) submission that:

a literate environment should be perceived not merely as a simple stock of written documents in the national language; but as a gradual process of moving from oral traditions to written communication practices which can only come about through regular use of written communication by newly literate populations, re-investing what they have learnt in their everyday lives. And such a process only being possible where initial literacy is acquired in the language of the immediate environment that is, the indigenous language - pp 87-88.

The fact remains that, mother tongue use brings learners quickly to the threshold of literacy and the effective use of library resources. This helps the learner to see his/her language as important and this has a salutary effect on his/her literacy acquisition.

Table 2: Motivational Needs for Literacy in the Mother Tongue

Reasons for desiring literacy in the mother – tongue	freq.	%
To become literate in a familiar language	3	12.0
Communicative significance of my mother tongue	2	8.0
Self-actualization in terms of ability to read, write and numerate in the mother - tongue	6	24.0
It is an expression of democratic learning	1	4.0
To avoid frustration, embarrassment and anxiety associated with literacy in the L2 (English)	3	12.0
To be able to search for relevant material in the library independently	5	20.0
Opportunity for active participation because learners won't be forced to sit silently or repeat mechanically as in the L2 (English) class	5	20.0
Total	25	100.0

As can be seen, from table 2, adult learners' motivational needs for literacy in the mother - tongue, are many and multifaceted. They include the desire/need to become

literate in a familiar language (12.0%) communicative significance of one's mother - tongue (8.0%), self-actualization in terms of new competencies acquired in form of reading, writing and numeracy (24.0%); choice as a form of exercise of right to decide/choose what to learn (i.e. democratic learning) (4.0%) avoidance of frustration, embarrassment and anxiety associated with learning literacy in L2 (English) (12.0%) and provision of opportunity for active participation since learners won't be forced to sit silently or repeat mechanically as in the L2 (English) class (40.0%).

This result lends credence to the earlier submissions of Baker (2001); CAL (2001) and Cummins (2000); who have all reported the pedagogical advantages of literacy in the mother - tongue. Their arguments can be summarized as follows:

- ❖ use of a familiar language (that is, mother - tongue) to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning - symbol correspondence.
- ❖ since content area instruction is provided in the mother - tongue (L1), the learning of new concepts is not postponed until learners become competent in English (L2). Unlike submersion teaching (which actually is what teaching beginning literacy in English is), literacy instruction in the mother tongue allows instructors and learners to interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating participatory learning environments that are conducive to cognitive as well as linguistic development.
- ❖ explicit teaching of the L2 (English/ target language), with oral skills allows learners to learn the new language through communication rather than memorization.
- ❖ transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills is facilitated in literacy through the mother - tongue. Once learners have basic literacy skills in the mother - tongue (L1), and communicative skills in the target language (L2), they can begin reading and writing in English (L2), efficiently transferring the literacy skills they have acquired in the familiar language (mother - tongue). The pedagogical principles behind this positive transfer of skills are Cummins' (1991, 1999) interdependence theory and the concept of common underlying proficiency, where by the knowledge of language, literacy and concepts learned in the mother - tongue (L1) can be accessed and used in the language once oral L2 (target language) skills are developed and no re-learning is required
- ❖ learners learning can be accurately assessed in the mother - tongue literacy classrooms. When learners can express themselves, instructors can diagnose what has been learned, what remains to be taught, and which learners need further assistance.
- ❖ the affective domain, involving confidence, self-esteem and identity, is strengthened by the use of mother - tongue, increasing motivation, and initiative as well as creativity.

The present findings on the motivational needs for literacy in the mother tongue as captured in this study, has shown that adult learning means acquiring knowledge and competence but the learning process is as important as the learning outcomes. It has further shown that adult learning is autonomous. Adults define their learning needs and they learn only what is of interest to them.

Conclusion

This study examined the desirability of and the motivational needs for literacy in the mother tongue and library use. The findings indicate that adult learners have strong motivational needs for literacy in the mother - tongue. And as rightly observed by Benson (2005), what EFA means for people in developing countries is access to basic literacy and numeracy as well as other life skills that will improve their lives. Mother - tongue based literacy not only increases access to skills but also, raises the quality of basic education by facilitating classroom interaction and integration of prior knowledge and experiences with new learning.

An environment for learning is essential and by propagating literacy in the mother - tongue, we are thus, creating such an environment. By educating adults in their mother - tongues, children too, are encouraged to learn in their mother - tongue and library use.

The view has been expressed that an adult learns better in the mother tongue based on the strong motivational needs for literacy in the mother tongue. And since it is well established that language is an important variable in learning and intellectual development, it is therefore, the contention of this paper, that the best medium of instruction, particularly, at the basic literacy level is the mother - tongue because it boosts a learner's confidence to take up the mainstream language later on.

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